Made in Thailand: the rural idyll and the motif of thainess in monrak transistor

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"Made in Thailand":
The Rural Idyll and the Motif of Thainess in MONRAK TRANSISTOR

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When Thai director Pen-ek Ratanaruang's third feature film MONRAK TRANSISTOR (2001) appeared in the year 2001, the Thai film industry had already been seeing a remarkable upswing for several years. Since 1997, with the surprise successes of 2499 ANTAPAN KRONG MUANG / DAENG BIRELEYS AND THE YOUNG GANGSTERS (1997) and FUN BAR KARAOKE (1997), which screened at the Berlinale and received critical acclaim, innovative productions had changed the appearance and the self-image of Thai cinema.

The appearance of a young generation of filmmakers greatly influenced the aesthetics and production processes. The range of subjects was suddenly enlarged. Recent Thai film features many different genres and genre hybrids – reviving Thai genres, using foreign ones and mixing them into crossover forms – and uses widely varying film styles, from the slick aesthetics of advertisements to grainy images in independent films reminiscent of cinéma vérité. The new activity in production was remarkable and gained momentum over the following years. One of the notable effects of the new movies was to gradually bring Thai people back into Thai movies, shifting audience segments from teenagers toward the inclusion of a more mature, diverse, educated audience.

New modes of production emerged: alongside mainstream films developed by the commercial major studio system, semi-independent films have sprung up. These movies are independently or semi-independently produced and later distributed by majors. Independent films, on the other hand, are produced entirely outside the studio system. This so-called New Thai Cinema was created by directors like Wisit Sasanatieng, Nonzee Nimibutr, Pen-ek Ratanaruang, Yongyooth Thongkonthool and Jira Maligool, who had previously worked in the advertising and music video industry.

The euphoria about this upswing might be better understood in view of the historical background. The prior creative phase in Thai cinema had taken place in the mid-1970s, when Thailand produced a number of films concerned with social criticism that were viewed abroad as well. This wave, however, soon came to an end under a restrictive government. Hollywood blockbusters

took over and monopolized the market in the 1980s. Few local films were made. They were produced on very low budgets and were of poor quality, following the generic outlines and conventions of popular Thai genres such as the ghost movie, the transvestite comedy, action and teenager romantic melodrama. They were strongly formulaic, being mass products designed mainly for lower-income, rural and teen audiences. This gave them the status of low-class entertainment, culturally, economically and technically inferior compared to the more glamorous imports from the USA, Europe and Hong Kong. The conventional view was that Thai movies were mainly watched by working-class audiences. Internationally, these films were not viewed at all; seen from outside the country, Thai film seemed virtually nonexistent. In Thailand, local productions were unflatteringly called *nam nao* (murky, putrid water) because of their lack of depth, stagnant plots and unappealing reputation.

The low creativity and repetitive film form were also due to the rigid, stagnant structure of the film industry. The production monopoly was shared by a few major companies, large entertainment conglomerates that linked the film and music industry, drawing on a local star system that made up an important selling point of music and film. As no state subsidy for film production or film culture existed, hardly any independent films were made. Film emphatically was understood as entertainment rather than art, and produced as a quick and cheap consumer item. In this context, it is hardly surprising that the successful new films were met with great enthusiasm and triggered many new productions, some of which were just as well received.

Thai Film Becomes Transnational

Perhaps the most striking new aspect of recent Thai cinema is its transnationality. While higher production values were one reason for the sudden popularity of local films, an equally important reason seemed to be their newly acquired international visibility and the fact that they had gone abroad and met with approval, sometimes even garnering awards. These transnational careers were all the more remarkable as Thai production had, up till then, hardly ever crossed the country's borders. While influences from outside had always been apparent and met with interest, the cultural flow had remained largely one-directional. Only a few particular films had travelled abroad to be screened to foreign audiences. For reasons of language, and since the large mass of the mainstream followed unchanging formulas catering to rural or lower-class Thai audiences, their export was not considered an option.

Thus, the turn of events from 1997 onwards brought a substantial shift in the local film world's self-perception. The recognition from outside the country generated an immense sense of self-esteem. Success abroad, especially in the first-world regions of Europe and the USA, has a long tradition of being perceived as prestigious, elevating the meaning of national culture beyond the nation's boundaries and strongly affirming it.This uplift of esteem entailed further transnational developments of the Thai film industry, such as the export of theatrical and DVD distribution rights to US and European markets. An important novelty for Thai film was the beginning of its worldwide distribution. Several productions have been bought by international distributors, perhaps most famously SATREE LEK / IRON LADIES (2000) and ONG-BAK (2003). The novel experience of being marketable to foreign audiences has also fuelled interest in coproductions. Lately, the Thai industry has coproduced with Hong Kong, Singapore and Europe to an unprecedented extent. Reaching out beyond the Thai market has proved crucial to film projects, as it is the key to international visibility as well as to commercial value in the global market. This growing internationality has altered Thailand's image of its own film industry. It is increasingly seen as a business to be taken seriously, offering opportunities that might actually be profitable.

The exposure to the international film circuit has left traces: as filmmakers, film students, scholars and journalists go abroad to attend festivals and conferences, they bring home foreign influences, inspirations and know-how that might find their way into new productions. Many filmmakers of the younger generation have spent a substantial period of time abroad, attending art or film school in the USA or Europe and thus becoming accustomed to foreign ways of life, international production standards as well as the conventions of the international film business. Transnationality becomes an aspect of growing importance in artistic careers. In fact, it is perhaps no coincidence that the beginning of the new developments in Thai film was itself fuelled by factors linked with transnationality: a rise in production values inspired by the standards of advertising, themselves modelled on international high-end advertising style; the fact that several filmmakers had been educated and had gained work experience in the USA and Europe, and, importantly, the rise of consumer culture, adapted from industrialized countries, and the expansion of cineplex culture.

The increasing transnationality of the global cultural flow is a general development. As worldwide travel, mobility, and labor migration increase, a growing part of the world population becomes exposed to foreign cultural products. These products are strongly influenced for their

part by transnational movements, integrating and transculturalizing experiences of the foreign. This entails rapid changes in the dynamics of the global film industry. Products designed with international marketability in mind are increasingly rooted, financially and creatively, across multiple countries so as to maximize interest and appeal to a diverse audience. Although the dominance of US cinema is uncontested on the world market, the recent tendency towards global cinema shifts the attention of the industry and viewers alike to cinemas of other countries. As foreign influences become popular in Hollywood film, mainstream audiences become aware of so-called world cinema as an alternative. The newfound interest might cause a rise in the esteem of non-US cinemas. At the same time, these cinema industries are becoming increasingly aware of the role of transnationality in the global film industry, aiming to take part in it.

The transnationalization of cinema, brought forth through economic forces, entails changing cultural practices: just as the appearances of movies shift, so does the understanding of the national self and its relation to the Other. Seeing culture as a "contingent scheme of meanings tied to power dynamics" means that cultural practices are embedded in strategies of positioning, control and maneuver: culture-making is linked to processes of reconfiguration of culture and identity (Ong 1999). Thus, as Thai movies aim for foreign markets, the issue of Thainess and its various interpretations shift in meaning. The prospect of selling Thai movies abroad, encouraged by surging interest in Asian cinemas since the mid-nineties, has induced rapid reconfigurations of the nation's self-image. All the while, the tendencies of transnationalization are obviously contradictory to the classical notion of national culture and national cinema. From the space between these two concepts, traces appear in recent Thai cinema, as we shall explore in the case of MONRAK TRANSISTOR.

The 1997 Economic Meltdown and the Resurgence of Thainess

It is instructive to consider the effects of the late-1990s economic crisis in Thailand, one of the worst in the country's history, on its films. The year 1997 marked the peak of an economic crisis that expanded across Southeast Asia. Millions of employees were laid off. The baht, the national currency, was devalued on July 1, 1997, and a recession set in that compelled Thailand to seek assistance from the International Monetary Fund. Before this date, Thailand had been one of the most rapidly developing countries in the region, with the potential to join the ranks of Newly Industrialized Countries such as South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. The booming economy was

based on a policy of dependency on foreign money – investment from abroad boosted the stock market, land prices, and job opportunities for white-collar workers. Globalization was a buzzword until the bubble burst.

In the context of the crash, *khwam pen Thai*, usually translated as Thainess, became a vigorous ideology, leaving its mark on economic as well as cultural developments. *Khwam pen Thai* might be described as a strong awareness of one's identity as a citizen of the Thai state and of one's origins as firmly rooted in Thai culture. It also denotes imagined characteristics of the nation's citizens as a whole.

As life got harder, Thailand redirected its orientation from an imagined generic West back towards an imagined specific Thailand. There was a strong economic, social and cultural trend of rediscovering the country's own history, local knowledge and cultural roots, an ideology that fed on the distrust of the West that had arisen from the hardship brought on by the economic breakdown of the country. Values perceived as Western, especially consumerism, belief in progress and in constant innovation, were now viewed with scepticism, and there was a widespread need for native, reliable values that could sustain the country, its wellbeing and its identity in the long run. In a widely heard speech, the king praised the importance of moderate living, encouraging the Thai people to watch their spending and live a simpler, less materialistic life. The government also promoted the ideal of a self-sufficient economy, based on the culture of past times and depending less on foreign monetary investment than on self-sustainability (Anchalee 2006, 153). The ideology of going back to Thai roots resonated in every aspect of Thai life, with many people selling superfluous possessions to get by and leaving the cities to return to their hometowns for a simpler life.

Before long, the popularity of the term Thainess became a trend, a slogan comparable to a brand name – products like "real Thai coffee" or "old style noodles" appeared, often featuring the attribute *boran* (ancient, indigenous). There was a revival in ancient Thai medicine and healing massage; retro forms of popular culture such as old comic books, magazines or pop songs from the 1980s came back into fashion, and newly produced furniture was styled to look antique. Nostalgia caused all these products to sell well, in stark contrast to the ideals of self-sufficiency, simplicity and modesty that had lent Thainess credibility in the first place, Thainess itself became a highly popular item for consumption (Reynolds 2002, 311). The commodification of Thainess, linked to the rise of middle class consumer power from the mid-1980s on, entailed an alienation

of the Thai people from what was asserted to be their national identity. Kasian Tejapira has criticized this as follows:

> Thainess has been ripped away from its traditional social contexts, deprived of its aura and turned into a free-floating signifier, which can then be commodified by goods of any nationality or origin. […] These commodified forms have changed Thainess willy-nilly into one identity option among many others in the free market of a limitless plurality of significations, in the same sense that Coke is just one option among many other brands of cola, Singha Beer is just one option among many other brands of beer, and so on. In the process, Thainess has become, among Chineseness, Europeanness, Englishness, and so forth, another choice among a variety of national/ethnic signifiers to be worn or shed according to the changing circumstances. (Kasian 2001, 163)

The concept of Thainess is, however, not an invention of the mid-Nineties economy crisis. As Thongchai Winichakul wrote several years before the crash:

> In Thailand today there is a widespread assumption that there is such a thing as a common Thai nature or identity: *khwampenthai* (Thainess). It is believed to have existed for a long time, and all Thai are supposed to be well aware of its virtue. The essence of Thainess has been well preserved up to the present time despite the fact that Siam has been transformed greatly toward modernization in the past hundred years. Like other nationalist discourse, it presumes that the great leaders (in this case monarchs) selectively adopted only good things from the West for the country while preserving the traditional values at their best. (Thongchai 1994, 3)

Although the discourse of Thainess has a long history, there has hardly ever been a single, clear definition of what it consists of. Kasian Tejapira describes the imaginary construct of Thainess as follows:

> […] recognizable imaginary characteristics of Thainess, constructed out of the official nationalist ethno-ideology sponsored by the state, [include]:
>
> 1. The Thai nation as a harmonious village (national) community.
> 2. The state as an organic outgrowth of traditional hierarchy from family to community to nation.
> 3. Vigilance against «the political and ideological other» and «outsiders» arbitrarily misrepresented in racial or ethnic terms as "un-Thai".
> 4. Deflection of the origin of social problems to the level of personal morality.
> 5. Thainess is culturally unique.
> 6. Buddhism as the national religion.
>
> Try as the state may, Thai national identity never settles into a homogenous and unproblematic whole for the average people. In practice, what is regarded as Thai identity is more likely to be a ghostly mesmerizing by one or more of these characteristics. (Kasian 2001, 156)

The Country / City-Dualism in MONRAK TRANSISTOR

MONRAK TRANSISTOR tells the story of Paen, a young country boy with a great love of music. He likes to sing at temple fairs in his village, and his carefree, naïve charm and talent for singing

make him a born entertainer. At one of these fairs, he falls in love with Sadao. On their wedding day, his present to her is a transistor radio, symbol of his love of songs and of the young couple's happiness.

Soon Paen has to leave his wife in order to serve in the Thai military. In a thoughtless moment, he then deserts the army and runs away to Bangkok to follow his dream of becoming a singer. Lured by false promises, he is stranded as an errand-boy for a mediocre concert agency. Reality catches up with him: many unfortunate twists of fate bring him to a sugar palm plantation as a common laborer and turn him into a petty criminal. Things go from bad to worse, and it is only after long years of suffering, broken dreams and a prison sentence that Paen finally and ruefully returns home to his village and his wife, begging her forgiveness.

Country life is depicted as an archaic, bucolic sphere, and nature as beautiful and generous: waterways crisscross the area, providing a life source and serving as a means of transport for the farmers' rowing boats. The traditional wooden Thai houses built on stilts are surrounded by a verdant landscape that is abundant with all the population needs: crops grow in the fields, reeds are cut to thatch houses, and herbs serve as natural medicine. Work seems not hard labour, but a source of communal joy, and nature is at once a means of livelihood and a source of enjoyment. The relation between humans and nature appears intact and harmonious. The portrayal of the pure, unspoilt rural setting is crucial for the storyline, as it sets an idyllic opening that enables the carefree mood and the innocence of the romance and establishes a level of happiness that will eventually change with Paen's departure. While his village home is depicted as an idyll where time seems to stand still, the big city is shown as a chaotic, corrupt and ugly place, as an urban jungle devoid of basic human values, morals and warmth. Family ties and integrity are lost, and social contacts are marked by dishonesty, opportunism and egoism.

MONRAK TRANSISTOR is built around the dualistic contrast between the rural and the urban sphere, idealizing country life and characterizing the city as a hostile place. Stylized as rigid oppositions, the two contrasting spaces signify the traditional and the modern – namely, Westernized – ways of life, clearly attributing moral values to each of them. In a scene where Sadao, Paen's young wife, comes to look for him in Bangkok, she carries two plastic bottles of pure rainwater from their village as a gift for him. She finds him, but sadly, their plans to reunite are disrupted at the last minute. As Sadao narrowly escapes the fierce Bangkok traffic, she drops the bottles that roll across the asphalt and are lost. Shown in a close-up, the bottles symbolize the

loss of purity and innocence that the hard city life imposes on newcomers. At the same time, they signify Sadao's loss of faith and, eventually, her disillusionment with Paen.

The contrast is reinforced in the film's visual style. The rural scenes are filmed in vivid colors and bright light, featuring close-ups of nature details, emphasizing the peace and harmony of Paen's country home and family life. The Bangkok scenes are darker, shot with high-speed film stock that was underexposed and pushed in the lab later on, to achieve a grainy, rough look that mirrors Paen's feeling of being lost in a harsh world (Anchalee 2006, 152).

Country life has always been a powerful symbol for the ideology of Thainess, representing a peaceful, harmonious home where family and community values prevail. The meaning it has held as a reaction to rapid modernization since World War II has recently been further emphasized in the context of globalization: as the tension grows between the desire to be Thai and the urge to participate in global consumerism and hedonism, the rural sphere beckons as a nostalgic ideal (Reynolds 2002, 313). It also signifies abundance – agricultural life, though at times meaning hard work, cultivates self-sustainability and a trusting connection to nature's generosity. Not only does this utopian rural world harbour an ideal of beauty and harmony, but also of moral values such as simplicity, respect for nature, and egalitarianism. It thus becomes an ethical stance, an especially pure way of life. Unlike the situation in many industrialized countries where country life is completely imaginary, since self-contained rural lifestyles have almost completely vanished, Thai country life continues to be a real, tangible alternative to urban life.

The urban sphere is equivalent with Bangkok, the capital, as it is the only Thai metropolis. The role Bangkok plays in movies is usually that of the oppressively huge, gritty, disorienting city, a place where innocent country folk flock in search of money, fame, or both, more often than not losing themselves in the concrete jungle and its moral filth. Strewn in are signifiers of modernity and internationality: highways, the airport, the occasional foreigner. In fact, different depictions of Bangkok are a rarity (Williamson 2006).

The divide between Bangkok and the rural is a recurrent figure in Thai intellectual, literary and artistic traditions, especially in a movement known as *sinlapa pua chiwit* (art for life), which is highly concerned with social realist ideals and aesthetics, appreciation of folk art and a commitment to the political liberation of the masses (May Adadol 2006, 81). It was regarded as an instance of cultural opposition during the Cold War military dictatorship. Thai cinema has a

longer connection with the country motif as well. In the 1970s, a cinematic movement subsequently called the New Wave emerged. Filmmakers such as Wichit Kounavudh, Cherd Songsri, Euthana Mukdasnit and Chatrichalerm Yukol have based the look of their films on the aesthetics of social realism. They often adapted *sinlapa pua chiwit* literature and used *lookthung,* country folk music, in their movies, repeatedly drawing on the myth of the rural. This myth, as an embodiment of the idea of Thainess, at the same time implies the notion of country life as original culture. The imagined authenticity of the rural, however, overlooks the fact that indigenous culture is, in itself, composed of manifold influences of the varying regions that nowadays form the state of Thailand. Thus, the myth of authenticity is linked with the myth of homogeneity of the nation.

Thainess and the Past as Pastiche

However, MONRAK TRANSISTOR does not simply indulge in nostalgia for the past, but treats it with a certain distance grounded in a consciousness of the rigid dualism of the country/city-motif and its history in Thai culture, and of its signifier value for Thainess. By treating discursive elements of Thainess as pastiche or, at times, in an ironized way, the film comments on the constructedness of national identity. References to Thainess are scattered throughout the film, most obviously in the topos of the rural and the urban as a rigidly dualistic, highly stylized motif. Further references appear in the dialogue. As a salesman flirts with Sadao and invites her to a movie, she wants to know if it is a foreign or Thai film, because, in her words, "foreign actors are not as handsome".

MONRAK TRANSISTOR also refers to to premodern narrative modes that stem from a pre-technological age, before the appearance of the medium of cinema. Among these narrative style elements from traditional storytelling and drama are the quirky narrator character, the formulaic and stereotypical characters, as well as the highly unrealistic performance scenes, in which characters break out in song numbers in very unlikely situations. They draw from orality and from enhanced performativity, both of which are key storytelling traditions of the region and therefore manifest narrative Thainess.

Since the film imagines the rural world as arcadian and archaic, it often gives the impression of timelessness or else of a strange, hybrid time, a modern-day present with retro touches, which are

sometimes presented as icons of authentic Thai culture, such as the temple fair scenes at the film's opening. The imaginary past, too, takes the form of pastiche: At an open-air movie show, the village audience watches with delight as an old Thai classic flickers over the screen, in a setting reminiscent of typical Thai village entertainment of the olden days. Looking closer, however, the movie turns out to be FAH TALAI JONE / TEARS OF THE BLACK TIGER (2000), a recent film partially modelled on the style of 1960s Thai action movies, at times mimicking the faded color and the scratchiness of old prints. The anachronism is a smart comment on the Golden Age as imaginary sphere: in a scene that seems from the past, or perhaps from a timeless archaic world, appears a movie that is not old, but just looks old – actually, it is probably younger than the time the scene is set in; it is a kind of remade, faux past (Stephens 2003).

As historicity is substituted with an indulgence in past styles and icons, multifaceted objects become one-track signifiers for an ideologically affirmed nationhood, and retro signs function as "nostalgia without history" (May Adadol 2006, 93). What appears to be a carefree, postmodernist juggling of meaning might, at second glance, well be a sign of scepticism towards an imagined authenticity that seems questionable because of its reproducibility. As Fredric Jameson points out, two chief characteristics of postmodernity are its use of pastiche and a crisis in historicity – cultural collage without normative grounding of its elements, as well as a disconnection from historical knowledge to the lived experience of the present everyday world (Jameson 1991, 22 and 279). Both elements converge in the use of images as one-track signifiers for an imaginary past.

This conscious play with signifiers of Thainess thematizes an awareness of their instant reproducibility and, thus, their recent detachment from historicity. Further, it displays a consciousness of the national as an imagined value, and of the fragility of an imagined, highly idealized Thainess. It also mirrors the deep concern with the national that is so formative not only for New Thai cinema, but for post-1997 Thailand in general, as transnationalization and globalization propel the country into new contexts and relations with the foreign, prompting it to reevaluate its sense of identity.

"Made in Thailand" – Ambivalence and Source of Inspiration

After the end credits of MONRAK TRANSISTOR, an insert showing white on black writing appears, reading "Made in Thailand". Set at the end of the movie, this image conveys a complex meaning. On the one hand, it is a celebration of local production, of homemade film – MONRAK TRANSISTOR emerged in 2001, at the cusp of what was, at the time, proclaimed to be New Thai Cinema. An important recurring feature of these films, however, is the ironic or pastiche handling of local film history and Thainess.

"Made in Thailand" also refers to the product label found on all sorts of consumer goods and often implying an image of low-wage production, of being inferior in quality to imported goods. The comparison between Thai and foreign products has long been a sensitive issue which Thai consumers have met with ambivalence. In their hit song MADE IN THAILAND from the early 1980s, the Thai rock band Carabao critiques the implications of the production declaration. Labelling goods with these words implicitly equated them with cheap labor, lower prices and lesser quality than imported Japanese, European or US goods, which were so expensive that the majority of Thais could not afford them. However, as Carabao point out, Thai products are often bought up wholesale, exported abroad, re-labelled and re-imported to Thailand to be sold at higher prices, becoming highly desirable because of this status upgrade.

Things have changed. In the wake of the post-1997 reassessment of Thainess, "Made in Thailand" often signifies a special homegrown quality, returning to nostalgic and nationalist values. As a result of the increasing commodification, a de-referentialization of the *thai* signifier has taken place: "Made in Thailand" has become a label, comparable to a brand. Nevertheless, underneath this surge of self-esteem, the consensus that Thai goods are cheaper and of lower quality lives on, lending the label a kind of split personality. Market vendors at clothes stalls, for example, continue to advertise their goods as "Thai products, but made in Japan" in order to win over customers. This continuing aura of inferiority and its contrast to the emotional value of things Thai appears in the marketing of Thai film as well. Part of the reason for the enthusiastic pride of Thai cinema in its new movies might well lie in its competitiveness with Hollywood production standards: in striving to match the glamorous look of Hollywood imports, the industry has concentrated on achieving a similarly polished, expensive-looking surface aesthetic by producing high-concept films.

Since MONRAK TRANSISTOR thematizes, amongst other topics, the hardship and poverty of working-class people in Thailand, the written insert's reference to cheap labour adds a sense of

ambivalence and concern to the level of homage and slight ironization. The multiple meanings that the film creates here are symptomatic of the positions Thai film inhabits in relation to its role as national production and as consumer product in a global marketplace. Self-referentially, MONRAK TRANSISTOR not only names but even performs its own status of production, its being made in Thailand, displaying full awareness of the complex implications of this label. The written insert thus becomes a commentary on the state of Thai film and its search for a place in globalized cinema.

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Filmography

2499 ANTAPAN KRONG MUANG / DAENG BIRELEYS AND THE YOUNG GANGSTERS; Director: Nonzee Nimibutr; Thailand 1997.

FAH TALAI JONE / TEARS OF THE BLACK TIGER; Director: Wisit Sasanatieng, Thailand 2000.

FUN BAR KARAOKE; Director: Pen-ek Ratanaruang; Thailand 1997.

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SATREE LEK / IRON LADIES; Director: Yongyooth Thongkongthool; Thailand 2000.